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ABSTRACT

The earliest recorded Chinese literature that has survived consists of folk songs mixed with verses and rhymes. Two factors determined the general pattern of subsequent development in Chinese literature: the nature of the written Chinese language and the establishment of the Confucian school as the orthodoxy in literary criticism. By 1800 there were more books printed in Chinese than there were printed in all other languages combined. The main body of the massive collection of Chinese books included histories and commentaries on Confucian classics, but even manuals on herb medicine were written in the same stilted classical language, and were treated as proper literature. The ideological trend in Chinese literature from the 1920's on has been one that shifted from a literary revolution that stressed a drastic change in the linguistic style to a social and political revolution. The most noticeable difference between the concrete Chinese and the abstract Western literature reveals the Western mind's preoccupations with the search for what is; a relentless search in nature that spurred the development of psychology, as contrasted with the Chinese concentration on what works. (Author/AM)

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CHINESE LITERATURE

by

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Like the chanting and shouting that reverberated at the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Peking, celebrating the establishment of the Chinese People's Republic every October 1, the collective voice of a people 700 million strong tends to be dismissed by the Western student of literature as a purely political phenomenon with little if any literary merit.

Yet something of this collective voice of China has been resounding at a different level, often outside the accepted views and direction of Chinese literature, but never completely stilled. At times in Chinese history the literature of the elite combined and folk tales, songs, and drama, and those were the times when literature had a particular verve and luster in China. This was the way written Chinese literature began.

The earliest recorded literature that has survived, the Shih Ching (The Book of Poetry, or Book of Songs, as translated by different Western scholars), consists mainly of folk songs mixed with verses and rhymes sung on various occasions, ranging from the most stately rituals to festive moments in the common people's rustic daily life, with the more sophisticated poems sometimes revealing folk origin. Two factors determined the general pattern of subsequent development in Chinese literature--the nature of the written Chinese language and the establishment of the Confucian school as the orthodoxy in literary criticism.

Written Chinese, growing from a basic stock of pictographical symbols, retained much of its primitive symbolic power. For centuries it operated on the Chinese subconscious mind, as though each pictograph continued to represent the concrete object with all its charismatic influence on man's life. In archaic times the symbols were carved on stone or bamboo slabs with a knife; the difficulty in reproducing them added to their magical appeal and induced an attitude of respect, if not awe, and a respect for the written character persists to this day among the Chinese.

The Confucian school of thought, which began to mould the Chinese mind as far back as the sixth century B.C., upheld exemplary institutions and behavior patterns supposedly documented in earlier records, but these records were edited either by Confucius himself or his immediate disciples. Clearly Confucius was making didactic use of the past as he went on to lay down the doctrine that literature was to serve a social purpose, namely, to make man into a viable social being. He pronounced the love songs in The Book of Songs as allegorical statements of certain moral tenets, and several other ancient works on social institutions, rituals, customs, and historical events, as the most precious repository of human wisdom and experience. Under this doctrine a lyrical, philosophical, historical, or even technological work could be included in the elite literature so long

as it was written in the epigrammatic, terse, elegant if not overly stilted, classical-style language, and could be interpreted as supporting the Confucian code of ethics.

For two thousand years the same Confucian-edited classics were memorized by every pupil, copied as models of composition, and were regarded as training for any kind of professional life. Later landmarks of literary creation unavoidably appeared in the same classical language, enriched with stock images and literary and historical allusions accumulated in abundance over the years. By 1800 the world saw more books printed in Chinese than printed in all other languages combined. The main body of the massive collection of Chinese books included histories and commentaries on Confucian classics, but since even manuals on herb medicine were written in the same stilted classical language, all were treated as proper literature.

Poetry

Chinese poetry best illustrates the two-stratum developments in Chinese literature, the elite and the folk. The original folk language in The Book of Songs was preserved in books and reserved for the elite writing, which became more and more divorced from the daily speech as it evolved from century to century. The elite writing (the classical) style was saved from demise because it remained the only formally accepted style for writing until the end of the nineteenth century. As classical Chinese poetry reached the zenith of its development in the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), economy of words was only one of the virtues of its worthy specimens. In the lines penned by the T'ang masters, the lack of prepositions and conjunctives did not impair their effectiveness. Nuances were suggested by the position of words, and feelings made vivid by images that were widely connotative. The two syllables, chiang-nan (river south), could bring to the mind of a cultivated reader the image of the land in eastern China south of the Yangtze River and the entire historical pageant of its development from the sixth to the thirteenth century: its rise to fame as the cultural and political center of China, the gaiety and glitter of its metropolises, the lush green of its countryside, and, above all, numerous lines of poetry written about these things by great masters during and preceding the T'ang era. In these best examples of classical Chinese poetry, the historical emphasis on Confucian moralism was counterbalanced by Taoist-inspired flights of imagination in nature. A Western reader is impressed by the serenity of the ink-wash landscape drawn in only one or two short lines that bear savoring again and again. He can identify, across the cultural barrier, intense human feelings through the moods evoked in the landscapes, from extreme joy to extreme sorrow. He also frequently finds poignant statements of complaint and protest against injustices done to man by his fellow human beings. He above all remembers the quiet beauty captured in those poems which, because of the range of moods evoked, often calms and sooths but never fails to stir the inner awareness of the reader. A line like this by Wang Wei (701-761), "Sun color cold blue pine," or "The color of sunlight looks cold through the blue pines," can have multiple interpretations as can all great poetic lines. Or take another line, written by Li Shang-yin (813-815), "Red chambers across rain mutually gaze cold," or "Cold are the red chambers that gaze at each other through the rain." It summons as much to the mind and senses of a seasoned Chinese reader as does Keats' "Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam/ of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn" to a Western counterpart.

Two unique features distinguish the art of classical Chinese poetry from the poetic works in most other languages. The relative richness in vowel sounds and homophones lend themselves to internal and end-of-line rhymes. Analytical study of the sounds and tonal patterns of Chinese words had reached a high level of sophistication during the sixth century, thus enabling the T'ang masters to perfect their rules about prosody and stanza forms. Poets in later generations became so attuned to these formal structures that even after the 1917 literary revolution they found it difficult to depart from them. The other unique feature is parallelism. Begun in The Book of Songs and carried to the extreme in the elaborately descriptive prose poems called fu in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.), parallelism requires a perfectly symmetrical contrast of images and words in a couplet. For instance, if the first line of a couplet refers to the mountain, the second line must refer to the river, or if the first deals with the world of nature, the second must deal with the world of man. It may sound too rigid to permit unshackled flights to the poet's imagination, but the neat syllabic count of parallel terms in the Chinese language makes calculated use of parallelism sound natural. Its net effect is one of rhetorical reinforcement which, like skillfully repeated propaganda, induces the desired emotional response from the reader.

The traditional exaltation of poetry also had its lesser effects. In addition to the lofty status accorded such a classic as The Book of Songs when it was allegorically interpreted, poetry also became to the Confucian scholar a source of wisdom as well as a mirror of the poet's moral self, and hence, a fitting subject for imperial examinations. Since everybody who knew how to read and write strove to pass the examinations, writing poetry also emerged as an aspiration for everyone with a pen, regardless of his poetic talent. Among the educated, poetry became an activity in daily life and even a medium of social communication. When a prince gave a banquet, the occasion called for poetic effusion, and as much ink was dispensed when a lord acquired a summer house. The degeneration of classical poetry of this category reached its lowest depth when writing poetry became nothing more than a stylized exercise in linguistic dexterity containing little substance and even less feeling. When this happened, the time had come for a revival of the genuine and the robust in folk songs.

Fiction

Some anecdotes, vignettes and character sketches are preserved in the classical Chinese language among the semi-historical accounts dating as far back as the Han Dynasty, but the real forerunner in Chinese fiction was the ancient storyteller whose efforts were applauded, not by the traditional literary critics, but by his semi-literate audience. The storyteller kept notes for himself, some of which were written down in the classical language by certain literati who were frivolous enough to choose this means of pastime. The circulation of these tales was limited, but among those surviving from the sixth century on, there are many echoes of ancient anecdotes and characters, taken from both national and local legends and history. The themes focus on unusual personalities and events, and the brevity of the classical language makes them more skeletal than full-blown stories. The preoccupation with telling a story for the story's sake and the propensity toward the strange and unusual among the earliest short tales written in the classical language find an eloquent example in the Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio. In this seventeenth-century collection most of the tales are between 100 and 1,000 words.

The circulation of better-developed short stories based on these earlier prototypes and elaborated in the vernacular of the day received its impetus in a curious way. From the second to the fourth century, Buddhist missionaries found an effective way to

reach the semi-literate and illiterate masses in China through the telling of stories in plain language about the lives of Buddhist saints. The experiment encouraged the growth of the early tales into vernacular short stories, and cycles of historical romances into full-length novels, because improved literacy had created a market for them. The writers ostensibly heeded the traditional moral injunctions: the message often was in the form of a verse or a preface which did not prohibit portrayals of the struggle between the satan and the saint in man and the conflict between human values. However, the position of prose fiction, vis-a-vis the elite genre "novel"--hsiao-shuo or "petty talk."

A look at Stories from A Ming Collection or Tales from Old China, or The Courtesan's Jewel Box, reveals the range of human experience encompassed in these short stories and some of their literary devices. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms typifies the heroic cycle novel, and All Men Are Brothers, in spite of its quaint English translation, presents some well-calculated ribaldry and action-packed picaresque entertainment. Traditional Chinese fiction offers variety, from the finely etched description of an eighteenth-century family in Dream of the Red Chamber to the fantastic imagination of Monkey and the thinly veiled social criticism in The Travels of Lao Ts'an.

Drama

Drama as written literature did not develop until the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1367), but it is relatively free of pretention about its moralistic function. From the dramatic ballads of very early days to structured song and dance performance first encouraged by an emperor of the eighth century, drama had always been recognized more for what it was, something to entertain, something playful; hence, its heyday under the Mongol reign in the thirteenth century when the alien rulers distrusted the high-flown Confucian moralistic literature and turned, unabashedly, to entertaining literature. This period also marked the beginning of professional playwrights who finally shed their inhibition, dropped the prejudices of the literary elite, and made their living as creators of popularly enjoyed works. The dramatic pieces produced to the end of the nineteenth century, however, never completely departed from their ancestral framework as songs to be sung and danced to, interspersed with narratives. Lyrical in most cases, action was not stressed until the advent of the Peking opera under the Manchu rule in the mid-nineteenth century.

Much of the same legendary and historical material was used in dramatic literature. Like King Arthur's knights who appear in tales, plays, and even on the modern screen, the heroes of the Three Kingdoms (221-265 A.D.) parade through the pages of folk tales, in ballads, and on stages. Many short stories, such as those included in The Courtesan's Jewel Box or the Stories from a Ming Collection, were rewritten as narrative verses and sung in theatres. Episodes from Monkey and All Men Are Brothers have always enjoyed popularity. Regional characteristics are accentuated because of significant local variations in folk music and dialect. A piece in a Shanghai theatre bore little resemblance to another of the same name in a Szechwan theatre in West China. In general the theatre before the mid-nineteenth century presented more lyrical singing, accompanied by light string and wind instruments. The Peking Opera was the culmination of a later trend encouraged under the Manchu rule when the audience, like the Mongols, preferred action-filled programs, with more group and solo dances of the acrobatic type, and louder, percussive music. Pre-Manchu themes dominated the Peking Opera as these would avoid political censorship. Colorful costumes, based largely on the Ming period (1368-1644) sustained an air of elaborate pageantry. The best of such a combination

of stylized painted masks, stage movements and dance steps, punctuated by exaggerated if not overpowering music, frequently achieved an enviable degree of rhythmic intergration.

The Literary Revolution

'For two thousand years the two-stratum development in Chinese literature persisted, with the elite continuing to write poetry and prose in the classical language. Prose essays, the principal genre recognized in imperial examinations during most of the dynasties, developed into a restrictive style known as the "eight-legged essay" in the mid-fifteenth century. Each piece was divided into eight sections of a fixed, proportionate length and followed a definite pattern of internal development, from the lead to the exposition of the thesis, to counter-argument, to conclusion. Overladen with obscure literary and historical allusions, known only to the most erudite, classical prose lost its effectiveness as a general medium of communication toward the end of the nineteenth century.

'Then came the 1917 literary revolution. The impact of Western thought from Christianity to social Darwinism, introduced into China through translations of Dante, Goethe, Tolstoi, Ibsen, Husley and others, opened a floodgate of ideas and started a convulsion in the Chinese conceptual world. The self-contained and self-sufficient Confucian ideology collapsed under the weight of iconoclasticism revived by attitudes and values validated in the Western world. Just as the Chinese language was stretched in the fourth century to accomodate abstractions in Indian Buddhism, now a new language was developed to express new or revived orthodox ideas, and the stock of the new language was the plain talk of the common folk.

"Use your hand to write down what your mouth says," declared the literary revolutionists, including Hu Shih (1891-1962). The plain talk so earnestly advocated was not quite the language of the Chinese man-in-the-street. What the writers were saying in the 1910s and 1920s had to do primarily with political revolution and social reform. So they indulged in the use of borrowed Western terms and syntax. Science and democracy became main subjects of newspaper and magazine polemics. Socrates replaced Confucius and Jesus dethroned Buddha. In poetry, justification for discarding the age-old forms perfected in the T'ang Dynasty was found first in nineteenth-century Byronic romanticism, then in French symbolism. Young poets freely experimented with new prosodies and diction, openly acknowledging their imitation of the West. In fiction Dickens and Maupassant rose to popularity that sustained itself for years. Lines from Ibsen's "A Doll's House" were recited on and off stage by the new generation.

After rounds of experimentation, the new poets found themselves returning to the basic Chinese stanza form, the Quatrain. Each line was dominated by two or three breath breaks or stress segments, which conforms to the old rhythmic patterns of the five or seven-syllable lines of the T'ang Dynasty masters. The coterie known as the Crescent Group led this development.

Lu Hsun's (Chou Shu-jen, 1881-1936) A Madman's Diary, patterned after Gogol's novel of the same name, signaled a promising beginning of the new novel. By seeing ugly reality in a surrealistic way, the writer borrowed the mouth of the hero, also the victim, to make incisive commentary on the world around him. Unfortunately most of the new writers and their readers were still too accustomed to the story plainly told as a story, and too eager to identify

themselves with characters whose behavior they aspired to or resembled. Thus Pa Chin (Li Fei-kan, 1905-) wrote himself into fame with one story after another of the Chinese youth struggling against social and political bondage. The heroes of the new fiction were young students, or student-turned-worker, or self-taught young farmers, all awakened to the importance and urgency of their own lives, in contrast to the traditional Chinese emphasis on the stability of the social order. They ran away from their families to seek a new life and real love, striving against all kinds of pressures, and were killed or survived to join the revolutionary movement. After the first dozen novels or so, the themes and plots became quite repetitious, and their language largely unnatural, but young readers eagerly read them and asked for more.

With the appearance of Shaw, Ibsen, and Strindberg, Chinese drama suddenly became quite lively and innovative. Playwrights found spoken drama a more useful tool, and traditional operas, Peking and local, were left to a more conservative audience. Ts'ao Yu (Wan Chia-pao, 1905-) learned from the Greek tragedies and Eugene O'Neill when he wrote Thunderstorm, and his trilogy incorporating this three-act play had powerful appeal. Because of its value as an economical mass medium suitable for group activities, spoken drama flourished and has, perhaps, made a greater contribution than any other genre to modern Chinese literature, immediately before and during World War II.

The ideological trend in Chinese literature from the 1920s on has been one that shifted from a literary revolution that stressed a drastic change in linguistic style to a social and political revolution. It is an irony: the entry of the various Western concepts about literature, from romanticism to symbolism to realism, first upset the Confucian doctrine of using literature as a purveyor of morals, then sent the writers right back to a didactic use of literature. The prevailing social climate in China demanded it. Writers at the end of the nineteenth century were sensitive to their helplessness under the dead weight of tradition which blocked progress. Wanting to reach the man in the street, in the rice paddy, and on the mountain, they saw the futility of literature if social injustice was not redressed. They turned to revolution and use of their pens to advocate and provoke change.

Extending this direction in the literary movement of modern China, Mao Tse-tung urged social realism with his speech in Yenan in 1942, and called for writers to learn from the workers, peasants and soldiers. The assumption was that only from the real life of these people who, according to socialist theory, represented the rejuvenating force in Chinese society, could valid literature to be created. Anything else would be decadent. The War of Resistance (against Japan) literature of the late 1930s and early 1940s thus yielded to the themes of land reform and national reconstruction of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The formula, as demonstrated in such works as Ho Ching-chih's Stalin Prize-winning work, "The White-haired Girl," and Chao Shu-li's "The Marriage of Little Erh-hei," was to depict a hero who fought against tyranny either for personal freedom or for a new social order in the village. To sing the glory of the new China after 1949, the writers concentrated on the heroes who worked on collective farms or in factories to over-fulfill their production quotas under great strain. Thousands of writers of varying degrees of sophistication echoed the offical line to create songs, stories, and plays to glorify the state. This is a phenomenon which causes the Western reader to shudder in disgust, yet the full-throated voice of a peasant newly-taught to read and write within his limits, who sings with genuine feeling of pride and elation, merits being heard. Even a sampling of these "new folk songs" in the "Songs of the Red Flag," as translated in Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry,

indicates that some such voice will continue to ring true, and with moving force, in spite of the periodic political convulsions in Mainland China.

Compared to Western Literature

A serious Western reader of Chinese literature cannot avoid noticing certain differences, and his first point of reference is likely to be classical Chinese poetry. The difference between the two lines cited before from Li Shang-yin and John Keats would seem to have as much to do with the linguistic characteristics as with the mode of thinking in each culture. The Chinese poet seems to state things as they are; the English poet uses emotive adjectives, "charmed," "perilous," and "forlorn" to prescribe an emotional response for the reader. Where the English writer excels in manipulating abstractions to demand the reader's intellectual exertion toward a higher level of human experience, the Chinese writer parades skillfully chosen images of the concrete to encourage the reader to enter into an empathy with the writer, to be convinced by and to share his experiences. When the Western writer's quest for a definition of time and space and how man functions in relation to them, the Chinese writer offers in general an acceptance of the universe around him that is amoral, has an unalterable rhythm of its own, and therefore, is all powerful and grand. Between these big questions about man and the universe, the Chinese writer concerns himself with as wide a range of human beings and their problems as have been reflected in Western literature.

The most noticeable difference between the concrete Chinese and the abstract Western literature reveals a contrast that frequently disturbs a modern reader of Chinese literature. The Western mind's preoccupation with the search for what it is, a relentless search in nature that spurred the development of psychology, can only be contrasted to the Chinese concentration on what works. The Taoist acceptance of a universal pattern and his part in it not withstanding, the Chinese mind has been more engaged in designing formulas of human relationship which would maintain a viable human society. Occasionally what lies hidden in man but can be released by circumstances as destructive forces do surface in the consciousness of the Chinese writer, but his habit is not to describe, much less analyze, what these forces are, but rather to identify a device whereby they can be controlled, usually surpressed, for the sake of a peacefull smooth-running community. Even the storytellers occupied themselves almost exclusively with weaving an intriguing plot of events; rarely did their narratives touch upon the depth of a character and his inner complexity. Consequently, most of the characters in Chinese novels appear to be stereotyped, and the events in which they are caught, coincidental.

It would be unjust to say that there is no psychological insight or depth of character in any Chinese novel. Even in a picaresque work like All Men Are Brothers there is complexity among the 108 outlaws. The men and women caught in a web of delicate human relationships in that decaying institution, the extended Oriental family, are endowed with individuality in Dream of the Red Chamber. Sex, with all its power to make and break man, is unsparingly treated in The Golden Lotus. The Oedipus complex may not have been identified by its name, but there are numerous situations in Chinese fiction involving that strong attachment between a child and his parent that goes beyond filial piety. In general, too many Chinese characters, particularly heroes and heroines, have a way of absolving themselves of the sense of guilt. When something goes wrong, it is either nature's way or someone else's responsibility, but guilt does drive some of them to despair and even to death. It is not that certain human conditions

feelings, problems and responses are totally absent in the Chinese culture; the difference lies in the ways these things have been observed through the Chinese eye and recorded by Chinese sensitivity. To become aware of this experience, both literary and human.

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Three thousand years of Chinese literature: from the earliest times to the present day. The editor presents Chinese literature as an organic development using only those translations that will appeal to the western reader on literary grounds.

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Vol. II Cyril Birch, ed. Fourteenth century through post-revolutionary China.
Vol. I better than Vol. II.

Translations from the Chinese. Arthur Waley, tr. Random. Not a representative anthology, but contains many of the most famous poems and poets.

The Penguin Book of Chinese Verse. Robert Kotewall and Norman L. Smith, trs. Penguin.

Love and Protest. Chinese Poems from the Sixth Century B.C. to the Seventeenth Century A.D. John Scott, ed. and tr. Harper.

Twentieth Century Chinese Poetry: An Anthology. Kai-yu Hsu, tr. and ed. Doubleday.

*If time and budget are limited, these books are most highly recommended.

Philosophical Literature:

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